

Assignment: Written dialogue on Aristotle

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Student: Ludovica Schaerf

Dramatic and Epic Theater

THE DRAMATIST BRECHT IS REHEARSING HIS PLAY THE ANTIGONE IN THE
BERLINER ENSEMBLE THEATER, WHEN ALL OF A SUDDEN ARISTOTLE
APPEARS ON THE STAGE

Aristotle: “It is my understanding that you are going around claiming to have perfected the highest of all forms of expression: tragedy. For this reason, I hereby decided to pay you a visit and, while hearing your position, illustrate to you mine. To start with, I am keen to identify the pivotal matter of our discussion in the concept of katharsis and your refusal of it. Now, I mean with katharsis the cleansing of pitiful and fearful experience through the objectivization of those on stage. I am here to argue that this is, as it is clear to me, a necessary final step for all successful representations: It elevates the soul together with the mind.”

Brecht:” Don’t you see that your tragedy ends in itself!? What is the point of a representation if it doesn’t aim at improving society? I abolished katharsis, that insipid device for the bourgeois theater, because I want my audience to think rationally, to remain critical. It is only through distancing the spectators from the play and leaving their emotions unresolved that one can make them aware of their current miserable condition and thus, rebel to it!”

Once cleared their positions on katharsis, each one proceeds defending their own thesis and accusing the others', Aristotle through the analysis of the opponent's arguments and Brecht relying on his credo in a revolution.

Aristotle: "Although our concepts of 'end' are diverse in nature, it appears to me that you too have a teleological view. Now, let me explain this more thoroughly: what I identify as the theatrical τέλος is a therapeutic effect on the soul of the individual, and this end is a final one (as to say, there is no bigger end planned to it); On the other side, your tragedy creates a moment of fracture, what Marx identifies in the breakout of a moment of revolution, and this end is only an antithesis to a more encompassing synthesis: a communist society. Nevertheless, I am prone to label both of our efforts as aimed at improving the world, being it from a more personal or rather a societal point of view."

Brecht: "How can you claim to ameliorate society if your audience is clouded by emotion? My spectators are rationally solicited into action, while yours, being involved in the characters and seeing their stories develop linearly and to a whole, are drawn to no action and therefore no improvement. This is why, through my techniques of alienation, I make my audience more aware and better off, while you leave them in their miserable condition."

Aristotle: "What you are saying could be valid, but your argument is based on an easily falsifiable assumption: that reason and emotion are exclusive of each other. What you claimed earli-"

Aristotle can't finish the sentence that Brecht promptly interrupts him, afraid that this time the philosopher could be right.

Brecht: “If it is so easily falsifiable why don’t you give me an example? I can’t think of any instance in which emotion doesn’t cloud judgement!”

Aristotle: “Let me continue and I will get to that... You see, since you are rehearsing the Antigone, a plot that you have decided to change in order to create rational responses, I will show you how thought was already elicited in Sophocles’ version in the first place. Without a doubt, the tragedy in account is greatly emotionally involving, but, when considering Antigone’s act of extreme courage (her strenuous rebellion against not giving her brother sepulture and not observing the Gods’ *λογος*), I claim that a rational response arises. In fact, we are all drawn into imitating her and fighting for a cause we believe in as she did with her brother. Furthermore, when witnessing the catastrophic end to which Creon is entitled, the audience is pushed into avoiding his behaviour by the fear to share his faith. Therefore, as you can notice yourself, in this tragedy, it was emotion itself that led to rationality.”

Aristotle proceeds explaining his theory, while Brecht, carefully listening, appears to have lost his voice

“As I deduced from these *δόξαι*, the human ability and necessity to imitate is the principle at the basis of katharsis. In fact, what distinguishes humans from animals is their ability to imitate rationally, and I mean with it that, while animals are constricted by mechanical reactions, men are naturally drawn to imitate actions they consider good and avoid the ones they regard as negative. In doing so, humans are able to convert their emotional involvement in the characters into a rational imitation of their positive behaviours. In addition, for the reasons explained, sentimental engagement is the key element in the personal analytical

realisation: if the spectator weren't himself mirrored in the character to some extent, he would not be pushed to emulate him."

After a moment of silence, Brecht intervenes, persuaded by Aristotle's argument, dubious of his own works.

Brecht: "What you say, Aristotle, is faultless, but I will lay out a counterexample from my revision of the opera. In my own tragedy, the figure of Creon doesn't feel remorse nor his son is agonizingly in love with Antigone like in the original version to the point that we can conclude that there is no identification in the characters, nevertheless, I hold, the example of Antigone fighting against the tyrants is as inspiring as the one created by Sophocles. How do you reconcile this into your theory?"

Aristotle: "I gladly realise that we have come to seeing eye to eye: The complete isolation of your Antigone makes her character even more empathizable, your own tragedy has a katharsis, even a powerful one. Your creation appeals to the individual souls creating righteous people, who in turn constitute virtuous societies."

References (MLA):

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Cioffi, Fabio, et al. "Il testo filosofico." *Storia della filosofia: autori* (1991).

Semerdjiev, Stanislav. "Catharsis: The Common Goal of Storytelling and Life"

Also the following websites:

<https://www.bbc.com/education/guides/zwmvd2p/revision/2>

<http://www.artspecialday.com/9art/2017/11/20/bertolt-brecht-suo-teatro-epico/>